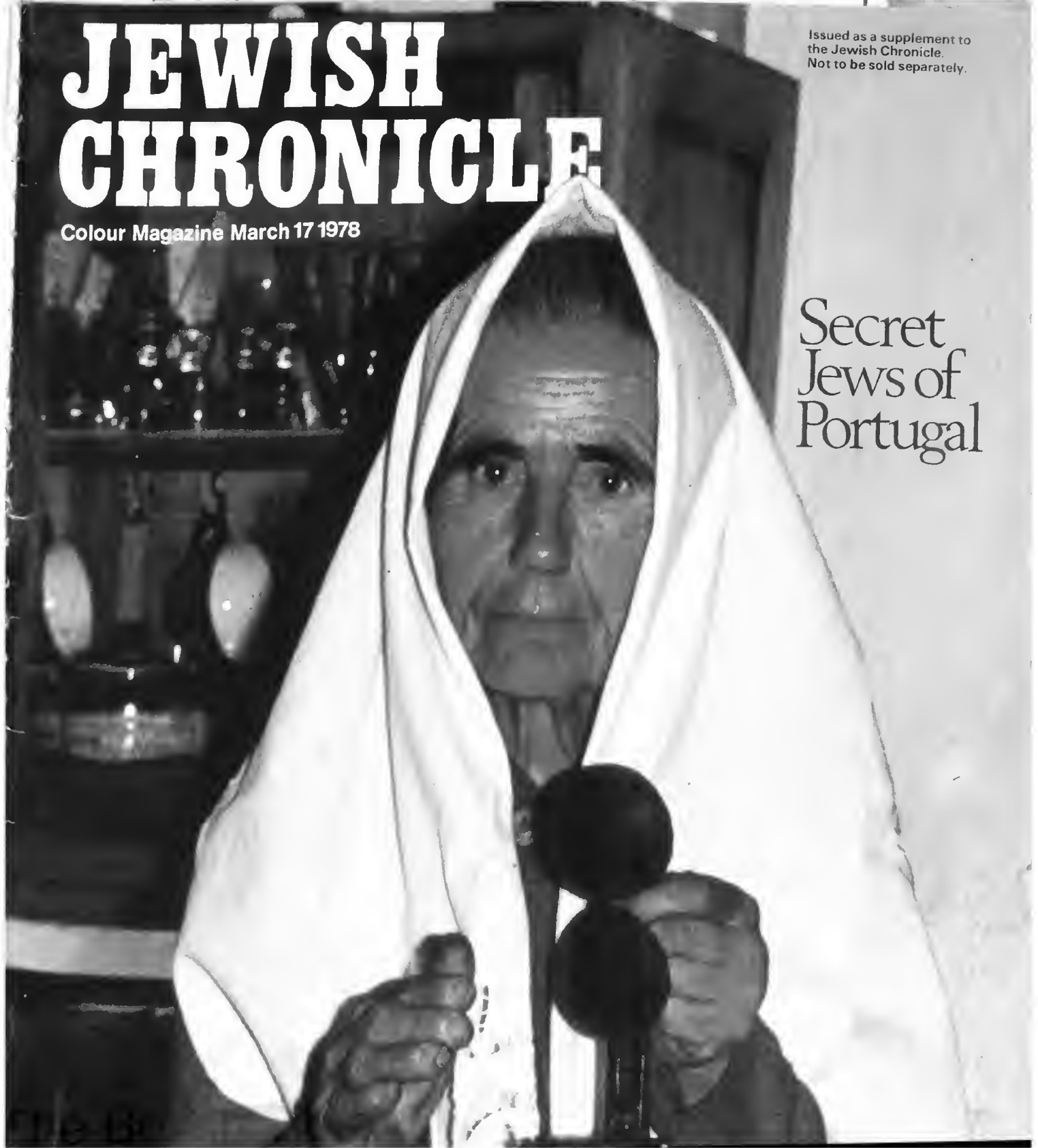


JEWISH CHRONICLE

Colour Magazine March 17 1978

Issued as a supplement to
the Jewish Chronicle.
Not to be sold separately.

Secret
Jews of
Portugal



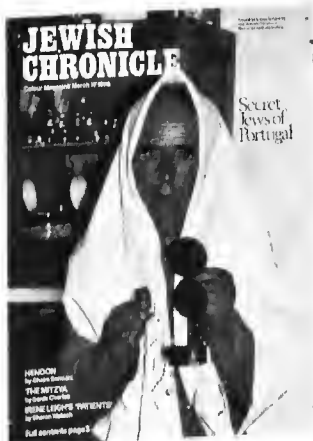
JEWISH CHRONICLE

Colour magazine

March 17, 1978

Editor: MICHAEL WALLACH

Art Editor: LEE O'HERLIHY



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Photograph by Amilcar Paulo

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**"WHEN MY SENSE
OF BALANCE WENT,
PEOPLE WOULD
STARE IN THE STREET.
YOU COULD SEE
THEM THINKING—
THERE SHE IS,
DRUNK AGAIN."**

Alice J. 29, Ex ballet dancer.

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THERE IS STILL NO CURE FOR MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS.

The hidden Jews of Belmonte



'Auto-da-fé,' 18th-century engraving by Picart. Thousands of Jews went to the stake

'Crypto-Judaism,' wrote the great Anglo-Jewish historian Cecil Roth, 'is as old as the Jew himself.' There have always been Jewish 'weaklings' who tried to hide their origin in order to escape ridicule, ostracism or worse. Conversely, there have been many more for whom clinging to the faith of their fathers demanded heroism of the highest order and who remained secret Jews at constant peril to their lives.

In this story of steadfast heroism the Jews of the Iberian peninsula and its dependencies have a notably illustrious place. They not only remained secret Jews themselves — and often paid for it with their lives at the hand of the Catholic Inquisition — but passed their tradition on to their children until the tenth generation, and beyond.

In time, their traditions took on strange forms

hardly recognisable as Judaism and they gradually disappeared. But remnants of these secret Jews — generally called Marranos — have survived, hidden from the eyes of the world, in Belmonte and other parts of a remote region of Portugal. Amílcar Paulo, himself of secret Jewish family who has studied his fellow-Jews for thirty years, has elicited many of their secret beliefs and practices.

He and Inacio Steinhardt, former 'JC' correspondent in Lisbon who now lives in Israel, here tell their story for the first time. Several sections of the article, including the account of Captain Barros Basto, are based on 'A History of the Marranos' by Cecil Roth. The final section, on the *chuetas* of Majorca, is condensed from an article written for the Jewish Chronicle by Alex Kesselman.



A young New Christian girl in Tras-os-Montes. This is the first photograph of the ritual cloak which New Christian women wear, reminiscent of the tallit

Left: Alfama today, the last Jewish quarter of Lisbon before the enforced conversion of 1497



On a Friday in mid-summer at sunset, we were on the outskirts of Braganza, in the house of Mrs Ilda, the widow of Dr G. From the outside the hum of the gadflies is the only sound disturbing the silence of the fields. The old lady covers her head with a white linen cloth and goes to the little table, away from the window, where a small oil lamp stands. Before lighting the flax wick, she closes her eyes and says in Portuguese:

'Blessed be my God, my Lord, my *Adonai*, who ordains us and commands us with His blessed and most holy commandments to kindle this holy wick, in order to illuminate and celebrate the holy night of Friday of the holy Saturday of the Lord, to the end that the Lord illuminate our soul and deliver us from error, pain and sin. Amen.'

Braganza is the main town of the Tras-os-Montes province, in the mountainous north-east, the poorest and most backward region of Portugal. Centuries ago, many descendants of Portuguese and Spanish Jews adjusted their lives to the poverty and the isolation of the mountains from which arose the continuity of certain ancient forms of society and traditions. In the groups of houses that line the streets and the side roads, and in those others that press upon one another like the cells of a honeycomb, the way of life has changed very little over the generations. Season has followed season, years and centuries have elapsed, and the toil of this ancient people has continued

uneventfully and without change.

In a side street, a little further downtown, Mrs Quiteria N does not keep the tradition of the Sabbath rest. But for her, the burning lamp is the sign for the weekly preparation of the *tabafeiras*, an imitation of the local sausage, but made without pork.

At the same hour, in the village of Carzao, Mrs Raquel Q recites in her tremulous voice: 'May the Lord who separated day from night separate our souls from blots and sins, our body from inquisitions and troubles. May the Lord's mercy deliver us from troubles and perils. Amen.'

Not far from there, at Argozelo, Mrs Violante S prays: 'Blessed art Thou, *Adonai*, our God, King of the world, who hast sanctified us with Thy holy commandments, blessed and holy, holy and blessed, and has commanded us, through Thy prophets, to distinguish Thy holy day to rest in it and didst choose the Land of Israel. Amen.'

At Vilarinho dos Galegos, on the border with Spain, Mrs Alzira R makes haste to finish her toils of the day, kindles the Lord's lamp, and prays to the 'great Lord, *Adonai*.'

At almost the same time, at Lagoaza, Mrs Margarida M, her head still covered with the white linen cloth, is engaged in a long series of prayers which she knows by heart.

The hidden Jews of Belmonte *continued*



Lisbon's main square, Rossio. In the background, the National Theatre, site of the old Inquisition headquarters

These glimpses of life in a distant province of north-east Portugal — away from the small but flourishing Jewish community of Lisbon — would hardly be worthy of mention were it not for the fact that they happened in 1977, in strict secrecy, in a free republican country. They are, in fact, the last act in a dramatic story which began many centuries ago, in the year 1497.

Jews had first come to the Iberian peninsula with the Roman conquerors in the first century CE, if not earlier with the Phoenician merchants. For the most part, they were allowed to live in tranquillity and they prospered. When, with the Catholic reconquest of Moorish Spain they suffered persecution and finally expulsion from Spain (in 1492) most of them found refuge in Portugal, where they had in general been well treated.

But events in the neighbouring country were bound to cast their shadow, and when the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain was promised in marriage to King Manuel the Fortunate she insisted that Portugal, too, be 'purified' of Jews. So on the first day of Chanukah 1496 the king signed a decree ordering all Jews and Moors to leave his country within a year. But while the Moors were allowed to depart peacefully he had second thoughts about 'his' Jews. Why should he lose all those fine physicians, pharmacists, astronomers, navigators and, above all, financiers? He would see to their conversion to Catholicism.

He first offered attractive inducements for volunteers. Then, on the advice of a Jewish apostate and in the teeth of opposition from his Council of State, which pronounced the step 'uncanonical,' he had all Jewish children between the ages of four and fourteen forcibly presented for baptism. The day was the first day of Passover 1497. Many parents themselves killed their children rather than see them baptised.

Those who survived were brought up as Christians at royal expense and eventually sent to populate the island of St Thomas in Africa.

In face of all the horror and despair the Jews refused to convert and asked to be allowed to leave, on ships which the king had promised to provide. King Manuel ordered them to assemble in Lisbon for embarkation.

The palace of Estaos stood in Lisbon's main square, Rossio. It was demolished by an earthquake in 1755 and on its site was built the National Theatre of Dona Maria II, recently rebuilt after a fire, as was the Church of headquarters of the Lisbon Inquisition. The original palace became the

In this palace were assembled the Jews of Portugal. Undeterred by the information that their children had been baptised and that they would not see them again, they steadfastly refused to give up their religion. They were then taken by force the few steps to the Church of Sao Domingos and to the font of baptism.

Pious Jews to this day recite the *kaddish* when they pass Rossio square and many refuse to enter the National Theatre.

Only 5,000 Jews, of the 75,000 who had resided in Portugal and the 120,000 who had been admitted when they were expelled from Spain five years earlier, managed to leave the country. Those who were left behind and were not killed became 'New Christians.' All outward practices of Judaism were forbidden, particularly circumcision, and the possession and reading of Hebrew books became a criminal offence.

Nine years later, at Passover time, some old Christians broke into the house of a New Christian family at 2 am and found them eating 'chicken baked.' Thus a new persecution had started, which ultimately led to the introduction of the Inquisition in Portugal in 1539 (in Spain it had begun in 1481).

Between that date and 1834, when the Inquisition was finally abolished in Portugal, countless thousands of New Christians, who turned out to be secret Jews, were burnt at the stake for their stubborn adherence to the faith of their fathers. Among the victims of the *autos da fe* were many men — and women — of great distinction and influence in national life, including

The Jewish traditions had to be passed on from parents to children in the strictest secrecy and by word of mouth. They became distorted with time and conditioned by the circumstances in which they had to be observed. New and — to us — strange forms of observance gradually developed, as well as an entire new liturgy (almost wholly in the vernacular) for the lighting of Sabbath oil lamps, baking of matzot, remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, and Repentance.

The prayers, recited from memory, became faulty and varied from village to village. These and stories of Jewish history were simplified so that they could be learned by heart by the children. The oral tradition was transmitted from mother to daughter and the women became the guardians of the heritage.

They would prepare the 'blessed wick' with which to light the Friday-night lamp, to bake matzot on roof tiles, and to prepare white linen garments to be worn on the fast of *dia puro* (the 'pure day' — Yom Kippur) and to be buried in. So ingrained was the habit of secrecy that it became part of the ritual and has remained so although freedom of worship has long since been restored. Thus the Sabbath lamp would be lit in the cellar. An unwritten law excluded New Christians who had married 'our' from all religious ceremonies.

For nearly five centuries the secret Jews believed themselves to be the last remnants of the Jewish people on earth.

By the time of the French Revolution, in 1789, the New Christians of Portugal (and of Spain) seemed to have run their course and nothing more was heard of them. (An exception is the account given in 1835 by the English traveller and writer, George Borrow, but it was thought to be a piece of romancing to which he was known to be addicted.)

Until 1917, when a Polish Jew, Samuel 'Schwarz' was sent to Belmonte, a little town perched high in the hills of Sarra da Estrela, north-east Portugal, to direct some tin-mining operation. Shortly after his arrival, Schwarz was approached by a local merchant who, in his anxiety to do business with the new mining company, advised the engineer not to buy from one of his competitors. 'It is enough for me to tell you that he is a Jew.'

As Schwarz wrote in one of his papers, 'it was indeed enough' to get him to hasten to meet the man. The 'Jew' denied the accusation emphatically despite Schwarz's efforts to convince him that he himself was a Jew. A long time later, and by accident, Schwarz met the man in the streets of Lisbon. He invited him to come with him to the local synagogue, a place the 'Jew' from Belmonte had no idea existed. On his return home he introduced Schwarz to the old women of the 'nation' — as they called themselves — saying, 'He is one of us.' This fact permitted Schwarz to talk to the women, but they revealed nothing in return.

The hidden Jews of Belmonte *continued*

Finally one day, an old matriarch said to Schwarz: 'Since you claim that your prayers are different from ours, at least recite for us a Jewish prayer in that Hebrew language you assure us is used by other Jews.' After some reflection Schwarz was inspired to recite the same six Hebrew words that were probably the last to have been heard at the Estaos — the *shemah*. Then, as he pronounced the name *Adonai*, the women touched their eyelids with their fingers and the old 'priestess' declared: 'He is a Jew, for he has uttered the name of *Adonai*.'

Schwarz's talks to the people and the interest aroused by his discovery in the Jewish world led to a new stirring among these secret Jews. The lead was taken by a professional soldier among them, Captain Carlos de Barros Basto, who became a figure of note in local politics and literature. A member of an old New Christian family, knowledge of the old traditions was imparted to him by his grandfather.

Fired by enthusiasm for the faith of his fathers, he taught himself Hebrew, formally entered the Jewish faith in Tangiers and established a synagogue in Oporto, to which he enticed his fellow New Christians. The crypto-Jews came to the notice of the 'official' Jewish community of Lisbon. Following consultation with the Jerusalem rabbinate its secretary informed the Anglo-Jewish Association in London early in 1925 that the secret Jews still existed in a remote corner of Portugal.

The noted diplomat and Jewish historian, Lucien Wolf, thereupon visited the area and his report set some international activity in train. As a result, numbers of secret Jews, including not only simple country folk but also civil servants, army officers, bankers and professional men, openly declared their adherence to Judaism and Jewish communities were established at Covilha, Belmonte, Pinhel and Braganza, as well as elsewhere.

But the revival was only temporary, and the secret Jews of Portugal were again almost forgotten by the world. Here is their story.

A few thousand secret Jews remain in Portugal. The wastage of the centuries has been accelerated by the growing religious indifference in the local society. They live mostly in north-east Portugal in the provinces of Tras-os-Montes and Beiras, in the little adjacent village of Vilarinho dos Galegos, in Carza, Argozelo, Rebordelo, and in a small community in the town of Braganza, most of whose members are shoe-makers. The largest community, whose members are also the most deeply-attached to the crypto-Jewish traditions, is at Belmonte, in the Beiras. There is apparently no



Street of the 'Judiaria,' in the pre-1497 Jewish quarter of Lisbon



A New Christian couple — their faces furrowed by centuries of dissimulation

contact between the two main areas, but slightly different versions of the same prayers have been recorded in both, and religious practices and beliefs are very much the same.

Secrecy is the strongest common denominator of all groups and is jealously upheld, much like in some kind of mystic sect. The Mosaic law as received from their ancestors has become diluted and distorted by many extraneous additions, prompted by fear of informers, just as if the ominous bailiffs of the Inquisition were still waiting to pounce.

Over the years we have gained the confidence of some of these secret Jews, at most of the places where they are known to live. Yet on each visit we must go through a complicated process of introductions and persuasion; sometimes we gain a new contact, not rarely with the assistance of persons who have been banned from the community because of intermarriage but who are anxious to maintain contact with the 'only true religion,' even if as outsiders. These can be recognised by some unexpected act such as closing their businesses on Yom Kippur, in spite of being refused participation in the five secret prayer meetings of the Day of Fast.

In an attempt to record the state of this crypto-Judaism we have covered more than 1,000 miles of country roads, and we were lucky enough to collect here and there some valuable information, sometimes on how it used to be in the olden days, sometimes on how it was just a few years ago.

Hebrew books have disappeared completely. So has the Hebrew language, except for a few isolated words and expressions interspersed in their prayers. The longest sentence, in a mutilated form of Hebrew, was recorded in Belmonte. '*Adonai sebaat milho colares quebrado*' (the correct Hebrew would be *Adonai tzevaot melo kol ha'aretz kevodo*).

Obvious symbols that could easily be held as evidence of Judaism, such as circumcision or the possession of religious objects, were banned centuries ago. Here and there ancient manuscripts with their prayers are secretly kept by some families. In Rebordelo, on the doorstep of Moises Abraao G, we saw a Star of David. 'It was carved by our father, of blessed memory, who kept the ancient law all his days,' explained the owner's brother. 'But my brother Moises married an old Christian and he doesn't belong to our nation any more.' They have also inherited from their father a manuscript of 99 pages, leather covered, whose front page reads: *Book of Prayers to the Almighty and Most High God*. It contains prayers, religious precepts and family records, the last one being the date of the death of Mrs Luiza Pimentel in 1848.

In the town of Braganza, we had a hard time persuading Mrs Ilda G to talk about the old days when practices were conducted by *rezadeiras* (women who lead the prayers), and how during Passover Jews used to gather on a sandy shore of the Sabor river. The time came to kindle the Sabbath lamp and we were permitted to observe. Our visit drew abruptly to an end when a

The hidden Jews of Belmonte *continued*



Orobo de Castro, an old street in Braganza formerly called Quarteis, where the majority of crypto-Jews live

neighbour, a fellow Jewess, walked in. The embarrassment in the face of our hostess was so evident that we took our leave. Pushing us hastily out, she made us promise that we would not reveal our little talk to anybody, particularly other persons of the 'nation.'

Unlike other places, the Jews of Braganza had enjoyed a few years of Jewish education through the efforts of Barros Basto, mentioned above.

Joao S is a shoe-maker by trade. Today he is in his seventies. At the age of twelve he spent one year at the Rosh Pinah Yeshiva, established at Oporto for a time in the twenties. Unlike most of the crypto-Jews, Joao is not afraid any more. He told us that there is no reason for fear now that the Jewish people have a free and independent State ready to receive all persecuted Jews. In his humble workshop, while he and his son work at their last, he talks freely and allows himself to be photographed.

Joao surprised us by singing *Hatikva* and Jewish prayers, all sung in a still powerful and pleasant voice. Sixty years later, he still remembers . . .

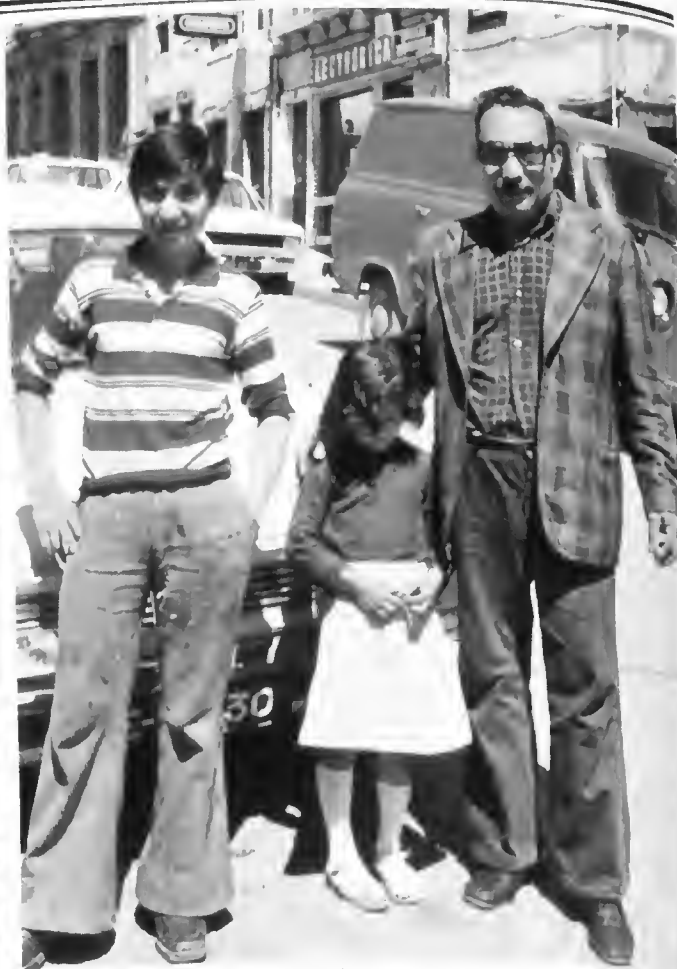
The prayers of his soul, those he recites every day, are those he learned from his parents, and from the *rezadeiras*; he repeated some to us. He regrets the many that he forgot. Everybody forgets. There is less and less Judaism in Braganza.

Why? we asked. 'Because of marriage, that's why. I myself married an old Christian, but I didn't change. My children follow my religion, and my daughters have biblical names — Rachel and Leah.'

'Everybody knows I am a Jew and makes fun of me. I don't care. In the days of my parents everything had to be concealed. If they had found out, they might have killed us. That's why my parents were married in the church and I was baptised. We had to pretend.'

Joao told us of the lamb they used to eat at Passover, and how great was the celebration. In September, on the tenth day after the new moon (they did not know the Hebrew calendar), they dressed in their best garments and prayed to the Lord to accept their fast. It was Kippur, 'the day of purity.' No food, no drink, no cigarettes. After the fast, they used to have a big supper — 'very clean,' that is, without any meat, in honour of the Lord, followed by songs and dances.

At Vilarinho, we met two old ladies, Mrs Alzira R (75) and Mrs Adelaide A



Joao Baptista dos Santos, with his younger son, of Braganza, who has kept faith with Judaism after nearly 500 years of enforced dissimulation

(72). 'There are many Jews here,' they said. 'The pure do not go to church; those that have mixed with the *chuzos* (their word for non-Jews), they go.' When they were in their teens, there was a certain Miguel Nunes, who was known in the village as the Jewish priest. They don't know why.

At Vilarinho we were given a description of the secret Jews' marriage ceremony. Three days before the marriage the bridegroom and the bride are joined in a fast by two friends of each. Then, usually on a Saturday evening, a 'woman priest' comes to the house, her head covered with a white linen cloth, and binds the hands of the couple with a handkerchief. She delivers a brief speech of good advice, and then pronounces the marriage blessing: 'In the name of the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, I unite you. Carry out your blessing.'

The couple are then married according to the civil law, at the register office. In some places they go to the church on Sunday morning to receive the Catholic nuptial blessing. Otherwise, it was explained to us, their children would be considered by the rest of the population as illegitimate.

When a crypto-Jew goes to church, he must declare to God that this is not his faith: 'I enter this house, but I do not worship wood or stone, but only the God who rules over everything.'

The ladies told us that Sabbath consists of prayers in the evening, in the morning, at midday and again at night. On weekdays they pray when they get out of bed, before and after meals. From them we heard about the 'Signal of Adonai,' a blessing formula, which in spite of some obvious Catholic influences remains the familiar Jewish priestly blessing:

Adonai, bless me with Your Holy Face.
The Lord bless me with His Holy Face.
Amen (and they put a hand on their chest).
Here Moses (hand on chin),
Here Abraham (hand over head),
The Lord bless me with His powerful and divine blessing.
Glory to the Lord in Heaven, peace to us on earth for ever and ever.
Amen. May this blessing ascend and be received in Heaven.

A red-haired girl, the grand-daughter of our hostess, entered the room to

The hidden Jews of Belmonte continued



The history of the Marranos of Spain and its dependencies took a somewhat different turn. Most of the Chuetas of Majorca have long since abandoned Judaism in any form (see story on page 16). An exception is Cayetano Martí-Valls (left) who wishes to identify himself with all things Jewish and 'awaits the long-expected Messiah.' His paintings reflect his singular history. Above is a view of Majorca's 'Jew Street'

announce that dinner was ready. Many crypto-Jews of this area are red-haired.

In the centre of Portugal, the province of Beira-Baixa, in the heights of Serra da Estrela, the highest mountain in the country, we reach Belmonte. This is a village of 4,000 inhabitants, of whom over 200 homes are considered to be of New Christians, known to all as *judeus* (Jews). This is the most important centre of crypto-Judaism in Portugal. A stone inscription was found in Belmonte dating from the thirteenth century. It reads, 'And the Lord in His holy temple, let all the earth be hushed in His presence' (Habakkuk 2.20), and probably belonged to the arch of its synagogue. This inscription can now be seen in Tomar, at the Abraham Zacuto Museum — also an ancient synagogue, much in the style of the Sephardi cabbalist synagogues of Safed. This shows that Belmonte had a Jewish community long before the Expulsion, and probably an important one.

Many New Christians who escaped from Portugal during the century which followed the forced conversion and returned to Judaism in northern Europe bore the name 'de Belmonte' (from Belmonte), one still used by well-known Sephardi families. Belmonte in Portuguese means 'beautiful mountain' and the name was later translated into the Dutch 'Van Schonberg.'

As in Tras-os-Montes, Jewish practices are led by the womenfolk and are kept in stealth. But here they are much more of an institution, observed by persons known to all as being different from the rest of the population. But only in their religion, because in other matters the relations with old Christians are apparently excellent.

Their faith is immovable. Even if some of their traditions can hardly be recognised as Judaism, there are many religious matters, such as doing business on Saturdays, eating on fast days, women wearing short sleeves or low necks, or girls dancing with old Christians (men are allowed!), to which they attach vital importance, and infringements are considered unforgivable sins.

In Belmonte we were received in the house of Tobias H, an old man with

many interesting tales to tell of persecution and denunciation, a constant fear of past centuries; and in the house of a very interesting lady with a quite unusual first name, for which we found no explanation, Mrs Suca D H. Both tried to explain to us, 'Jews of the world,' the various facets of the 'true religion.' While we talked to them, doors were carefully closed and the street watched from the windows to make sure that no old Christians were watching.

Crypto-Jews refer to themselves as *judeus* (Jews), *familia* (family) or *da nazao* (of the nation). Their religion they call the 'true religion' or 'the law of Moses.' Whenever they felt that we found one of their customs to be exotic, they were insistent that they followed 'the ancient law.' We could not be sure whether this was meant to be in contrast with 'the new law' of Christ, or with the Judaism that we explained to them.

The women are obviously the guardians of their heritage and they expect the men to be less knowledgeable and observant. Suca knows by heart an endless number of prayers for all occasions. She also knows many tales in rhyme and songs that she sings in a beautiful voice, joined in by the rest of the women. When we returned to her home on Friday night, after the blessing of the oil-lamp, she sang with devotion the Song of Moses, and after each stanza the women repeated the refrain:

Let us sing today to the Lord,
The God of an unique glory;
For the horse and the horsemen
He has thrown into the deep sea.

Apart from the Sabbath crypto-Jews have few festivals, but many days of fast and sacrifice. The dates are determined by counting the days from the new moon, but they have no names for the lunar months. In September they count ten days from the new moon and they celebrate the day of fast for penitence from sunset to sunset. Men and women usually dress in white for the day of Kippur. Eight days after the new moon of February comes the fast

The hidden Jews of Belmonte *continued*

of Queen Esther (but no remembrance of Purim). In March comes Passover, and they know the date from another rhymed prayer: 'On the fourteenth day of the moon, in the first month of the year, the people departed from Egypt.' From the Fast of Esther until Passover they refrain from eating meat of any kind. 'Because we don't know any more how to slaughter,' an old butcher told us.

During the first two days of Passover they refrain from bread. On the third day — 'when gentiles are not watching any more' — they make a heavy dough of flour and water, without salt, separate from it three small pieces which they throw into the fire, and from the rest they form round cakes which are put on roof tiles and baked in the oven. This is the unleavened bread to be eaten during the rest of the week. It is unpleasant and tasteless. When shown matzot they fail to understand how those tasty crackers may be eaten during the 'Passover of the Lord.' There are special prayers for the preparation of the unleavened bread and for the holiday itself. They also have the custom of 'cutting the waters': they step over a tiny stream of water, which they beat with a stick, to a 'song of the sea.'

Feliberto, a young crypto-Jew, told us about the mourning ceremonies. When somebody dies in the house the body is washed and dressed with the white garments used on Yom Kippur. Then all the waters found in the house are thrown away. 'We believe,' Feliberto told us, 'that the angel of death must wash his sword in order to kill more people. If he doesn't find water he leaves without taking other victims.' The priest is then called and the Catholic funeral takes place at the local cemetery. The relatives return home and after the last old Christian has left the house they sit on low benches for seven days. During that time a needy person eats at their table and is offered a complete garment as a present. A special oil-lamp is left to burn continuously as it does on Yom Kippur, and prayers for the soul are offered during the seven days. The same ceremony is repeated for one day at the end of one, three, nine and twelve months. On the day of the funeral the house and all others that are under the same roof are declared *trefle* (treifa?), and in order to be *untrefled* they must be sprinkled with water dispensed from an olive branch.

Bpain itself, the cradle of Marranism and the Inquisition, has been lastingly influenced by the crypto-Jewish presence but, as far as has been established, no identifiable secret Jews remain. But in the Spanish island of Majorca the position is different. The *Chuetas*, as the Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism (the *conversos*) in the fifteenth century are known there, were until quite recently stigmatised as inferior citizens. They lived in a separate quarter of Palma (the *Call*), could not join the army, navy or hold positions in the Church, and to this day bear distinctive surnames. Inter-marriage between the *Chuetas* and Catholics is of recent origin.

The ancient and illustrious history of Majorcan Jewry started to decline not long after the island was conquered by Jaime I of Aragon in 1229. It came to a bloody end in 1435 when they were accused of killing a Christian child for Passover, and many were burnt alive and the rest baptised. As in Spain and Portugal, many *conversos* maintained their Jewish traditions in the secrecy of their homes — a rich field of activity for the Inquisition. Side by side with the Catholic festivals they observed the Jewish Sabbath and festivals.

On Sabbath they refrained from cooking food, while attending to their business. On Passover they would roast a whole lamb, in accordance with biblical precept, and eat no bread. Meat and poultry were soaked and salted, and only olive oil was used in cooking. In time the practices disappeared, and only the isolation remained.

The sinister Inquisition was abolished in 1819. Two of the many sites at which recalcitrant secret Jews were burnt are well-known to visitors to Palma, the Borne and Plaza Gomila. On this latter square 30,000 people witnessed the *auto da fe* of 21 prisoners accused of 'judaising' in 1688.

By a strange twist of history it was in a restaurant on this same square that Jewish immigrants met in 1970 for the first time and decided to establish a Jewish community. It was granted official recognition the following year.

Mr Alec Kesselman, the president of the community, knows many



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The hidden Jews of Belmonte *continued*



Reminder of a glorious past — Seder plate, hand-inscribed with part of the Seder service, preserved at the Luc monastery, Majorca

Chuetas. Of those he knows, and there are many others impossible to reach, four families have declared their connection or affinity with the Jewish community. A youth of eighteen among them has expressed a desire to 'return' to Judaism. He is Nico Aguilo, a sincere young man who has learned Hebrew and who plans to go to Israel to study to become a rabbi. He hopes to return to Majorca as the first native-born rabbi in five hundred years.

Several other *Chuetas* told Mr Kesselman of their feeling for Jewishness. Vague stories of their Jewish inheritance have been handed down to them and the sense of inferiority pressed upon them by their fellow-citizens has induced in them a pride in their Jewish past. The establishment of a Jewish State brought this to the surface and the presence of a new community of Jews has kindled the dying embers.

In the sixties a group of *Chuetas* left to settle in Israel, where they formally 'returned' to Judaism. One family returned to Majorca, leaving a son behind. On their mantelpiece they display a photograph of Moshe Dayan and a Chanukah lamp. On the other side of the room there is a statue of the Virgin Mary, 'for the sake of the grandmother' who lives with them.

Another *Chuerta* who went to Israel is Isabela Munoz, a lady of wealthy family. She embraced Judaism and changed her name to Elisheva Yemin-Oz. On returning home she was committed to a mental home. Mr Kesselman made many attempts to visit her, but without success. The rest of the group are believed to have gone to Spain.

Various estimates have been made of the number of *Chuetas* in Majorca. Many Majorcans bear one of the fifteen names which originally denoted *Chuerta* status, and thousands more bear derivatives names. The figure generally given is ten to fifteen thousand, out of a population of half a million.

Many Majorcans, particularly young people, wear the Magen David as an ornament. When asked, they invariably say it is for 'decorative purposes' or 'I like the design.' One trader in the street of the silversmiths wears both a Magen David and a cross and brings forward the one or the other according to his estimate of the customer's religion.

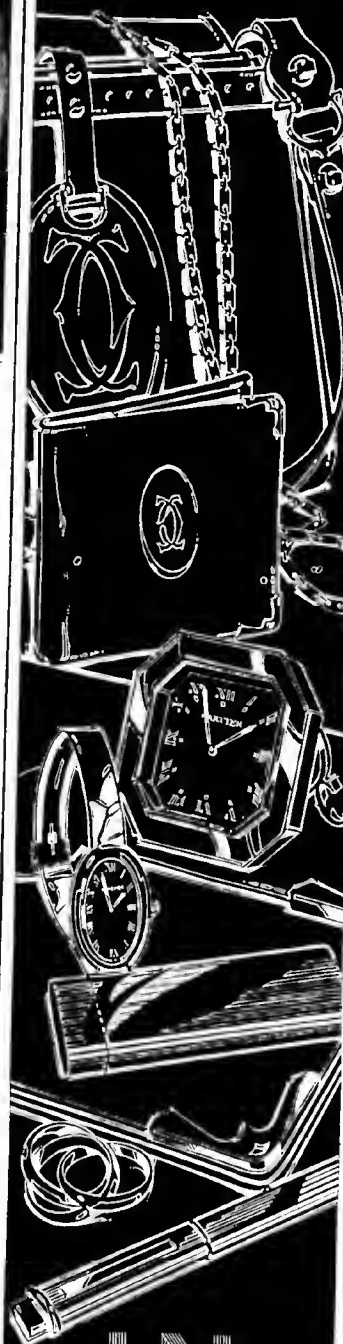
Some *Chuetas* are confused by conflicting loyalties. One of them told Mr Kesselman that his heart is Jewish but he has no intention of becoming a Jew. He claims kinship with Christopher Columbus, who he insists was a Jew (there have been many such suggestions). A young man confessed his confusion; he said he could not fulfil all that Judaism demands and he would practice his own type of religion by abandoning Christianity and believing in the unity of one God. Another recently came to Mr Kesselman's home and quoted a Majorcan saying to him: 'If you start digging you disturb many unpleasant things'.

An inconclusive and unsatisfactory epitaph, but Jewish history, dramatic, tragic and heroic though it is, is also untidy. ●

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